

Stockton Record

*February 2, 2013*

STOCKTON - The spirited students at Aspire Rosa Parks Academy paid homage to their namesake Friday morning on National Freedom Day.

"She was an important American who didn't give up her seat," read Saniya Taylor, a confident second-grader. "Her actions helped change laws across America. ... She would like for all people to be treated with dignity and respect."

Saniya, 7, was part of a 45-minute outdoor program on the school's concrete courtyard that honored Rosa Parks, who would be 100 on Monday. Parks died in 2005.

Several dozen parents and all of the school's 384 students took part.

The event was organized by Michael Harris of the Sacramento-based California Black Agricultural Working Group.

"It was a great honor to be asked to host this. We're a perfect location," said Natalie June, who has been the Aspire Rosa Parks principal for three years.

The celebration at 1930 S. D St. began with a parent breakfast before moving outside. The students, surrounded by bright yellow-and-blue balloons, sat cross-legged in rapt attention.

"In 2000, we helped create the holiday. We have celebrated Rosa Parks Day around the state," Harris said. "Why not here for the centennial? We have been well received."

Fourth- and fifth-grade students, the oldest on the campus, also sang about Rosa Parks. Part of their chorus: "Thank you, Sister Rosa, you are the spark. You started our freedom movement."

In 1955, Parks, who has been called "the first lady of civil rights," refused to obey a bus driver's order that she give up her seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Ala. In the years since, she has become a symbol of nonviolent resistance worldwide.

The school's founding principal, Mary Welch, is now an area superintendent for Aspire Public Schools. She also spoke.

"This school started in 2005," Welch said. "And we let the community decide the name. Rosa Parks is such a good representative of what is good. She represents courage, leadership and

how to solve problems in a peaceful way.

"We try to model her life."

February is Black History Month. National Freedom Day represents the day President Abraham Lincoln signed the congressional resolution that later became the 13th Amendment, which outlaws slavery.

Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Stockton, was part of the program.

On Jan. 23, he made a speech recognizing Parks' 100th birthday on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives.

On Friday, he presented a framed copy of those remarks to the school, and he spoke to the chilly students.

"Seeing your enthusiasm inspires me to do a better job," McNerney said. "Rosa Parks stood up, or should I say sat down, and it changed the world. That's what Aspire is all about. You can change the world."

Before they left for the classrooms, the students loudly recited the school creed, which emphasizes college as a goal, giving 100 percent, respecting others and the idea that "every second matters."

Saniya had given her all. After the ceremony, she checked out at the office because she was sick. Her dad took her home.